

and set me free by Iolaire02

Series: lucky number [3]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy Hargrove Has a Crush on Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove Redemption, Character Study, Forgiveness, Gen, Happy Ending, Implied/Referenced Abuse, Mild Hurt/Comfort, Out of Character, again kind of, kind of, this was supposed to have plot

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Summary:

Up in Starcourt Mall, the Mind Flayer collapses before its final hit can pierce Billy's chest.

1. Chapter 1

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, here's the "sequel." It takes place within the same timeframe as *out of the shadow*, has even less plot than its predecessor, and did not do anything that I wanted it to. Isn't that just always the way?

Also - Billy was pretty horrible in the show (even if you ignore the whole Mind Flayer thing), and if this comes off as me trying to excuse his actions that wasn't my intention. This is just a possible explanation, not a justification. I realize that it might not read that way and may in fact read as "apologist," so if that's not your thing this probably won't be either.

Title is from Bite by Troye Sivan.

Hopefully you guys like it!

"She was pretty," the girl says, her voice thick with the sorrow Billy can see pooling in her eyes. He takes a deep breath and waits to hear what else she has to say: it is her words as much as the pain written on her face and sewn into the texture of her voice that holds him captive. He has traded one master for another, but this one is kind; she sees him and hurts for him in a way that no one has dared to in years.

"She was *really* pretty," she continues, and Billy feels tears begin to burn their way into his eyes. "And you – you were *happy*."

He can barely remember it, can barely remember being happy. He has only been under the General's command for a few days, and he is already floundering in hatred and fear and misery. But then, he has been drowning in the darkness for a long time. The General's thumb is not the first one he has ever been under; the General's is just the first one he's ever managed to escape, and he couldn't even do it on his own.

He stands, and his body is heavier than it has ever been before. He stands to face the General's form, trying to pretend that it doesn't bother him that it was *his* body that led all the others to their deaths. He tries to pretend that the scent of melted human flesh, however it came about, doesn't bother him. It does, but so do a great many things, and he has managed, for the most part, to keep his mouth shut; he has managed, for the most part, to convince himself that a great many things don't bother him.

He has been hiding beneath the cover of night for years, surrounded by the lies he has told himself and the secrets he has kept from everyone else; but this girl, with her eyes that *see* him, is like the sun, casting light on all the shadows of his life, and he decides that he's a dead man already: he might as well be truthful with himself, for once.

It bothers him that the General is trying to kill a *child*, that the General is tearing the world apart for her just to kill her.

It bothers him that his body sent other bodies to their deaths.

It bothers him that the last time he was happy is a bittersweet memory, that his mother, who he loved, who he *adored*, took him to the ocean one last time, and *that* time? That time, the wave was bigger than seven feet, and the riptide yanked at him, and when he finally trudged out from the swirling tides, his mother, with his father's fingerprints purpling on the side of her face, with fingerprints on her face that matched the ones on his, was gone.

It bothers him that the only person who saw him, who lived the same life he did, *does*, left him.

It bothers him when he hates her for it, and it bothers him when he doesn't.

It bothers him that the people who love him leave him behind. (It bothers him that he has to make them hate him for them to stay, and that their hatred can't keep him from loving them anyways.)

Billy knows that he was always a lovable child. He was only nine when his mother left, and after her was a string of women who came

and went, one after another.

First there was Lucy Harmon, a tiny, dainty, beautiful brunette. Even though she lived in California, her skin was pale, and Billy always imagined that it was the color of snow. Lucy was winter in human form: she had cold fingers that danced across his cheeks, chilly lips that brushed snow-angel kisses against the slope of his forehead, slender arms bare of any decoration, like trees without leaves and just as strong as the roots that held them in the ground against the freezing storm of Neil's rage. She told Billy that she loved him with a soft smile on her lips, with cold fingers that tucked his sunny curls behind his ears, with huge eyes the color of the steaming mug of chocolate she set in his small hands, and though she wasn't his mother, he thought that maybe she loved him enough to be a new one.

But Lucy left the first time she felt the full force of Neil's icy, wintry rage; she left Billy behind, the words, "I love you," falling from her cold mouth even as her eyes froze over, and when she closed the door behind her, Billy felt like she'd shut him out in the cold, like she'd sucked all the warmth away from him.

Martha Wallis came after Lucy, and if Lucy was winter personified then Martha was summer. She was summer, though, in a different way than Billy's mother, who was all dark gold curls and ocean blue eyes. Martha had hair the color of sand on a sunny day, and eyes as vibrant as the leaves on the trees. She had a white sea-foam smile, and dimples that tattooed themselves into her cheeks, and her laugh was warm and breathy, like the breeze. Martha was tall and had a dip in her waist that Billy's father liked to rest his hand on. Martha was glamorous and lovely and kind, and she hugged Billy before sending him off to school in the morning, and when he came home in the afternoon, and before he went to bed at night. She kissed the freckles on his nose and tucked the blankets tight around him and whispered, "I love you," and Billy dared to hope.

But Neil was a whirlwind of fiery fury; he burned at the injustices of the world that dogged his footsteps; he spat ferocious words that burned like cigarettes on skin; his nails and fingers and palms left trails of fire that ignited in crimson and lemon and violet. And Martha left, and left Billy behind.

Alice Walker slipped easily into the footprints Martha left behind, and Billy told himself: Lucy was winter, and winter was when things slept; Martha was summer, and summer was when fire burned at the water's edge. Alice, though, was spring. She had clear blue eyes and dark brown hair, and a smile that split her face like the sun broke through the wintry clouds. Alice was always outside, always dragging Billy, or his father, or Billy *and* his father, along with her as she went to the beach, or admired the blooming flowers that lined the streets. Alice was spring, and spring was when things healed and grew and flourished.

Billy did. His father didn't. He raged and wept his fury. He was a tsunami, a monsoon, a riptide, and he dragged the things that were growing and repairing themselves beneath himself, and he drowned them with his lightning-bolt words and thundering fists. Alice's sweet young growing things could not withstand the tempest, and though she, too, had told Billy, "I love you," it was him who was left behind while she tried to escape the flood of his father's wrath.

After Alice was Elizabeth Ball, and she - with her scarlet hair and amber eyes - was autumn, and Billy lost hope. In places other than California, he knew, autumn was the season when life died. Even so, he accepted her love, and relished in it, though he knew it could not last.

And it didn't. His father grew angry and began to negotiate with his fists instead of his words, and Elizabeth left her *love* behind, left *Billy* behind, just like Alice and Martha and Lucy and his mother did, and Billy realized...

The only person who had stayed through it all was his father, who did not love Billy, though Billy loved him, and made sure he knew it. The people who loved Billy left, and the man who hated him stayed.

And so Billy discarded his soft, loving skin, and traded it for sharp, barbed, caustic words. He traded smiles for fists, exchanged words for growls, and he projected hate, hate, *hate*, while love swirled beneath the surface. He wanted to let it out, wanted to love and be loved, wanted to stay for people who stayed for him.

He especially wanted it when Susan and Maxine came along, because

Susan was soft, and Max was fiery; Susan had a spine of steel, and Max had shoulders like Atlas; Susan was a mother, and Max was a sister, and Billy desperately wanted both.

But Billy had learned his lesson. He knew that if he wanted the people he loved to stay, they had to hate him. So he snapped and snarled and swore; he spat in their faces and growled at their kindness and hurt them because he *loved* them. He loved them, and he wanted them to stay, and so they could *never* love him back.

He has done his job well, he thinks now. Max and Susan hate him, and he loves them, and he knows that he is a dead man walking. He is a dead man walking to face the General, and he loves them, and this time it is his turn to leave the people he loves. Maybe, when he is involved, love is only real if someone is getting left behind.

Billy stands, facing the General, and lets himself feel the love that has stolen everything from him, and when the General lashes out at him, he *screams*.

Billy has monster arms biting into his sides, squeezing tight enough to break his ribs. He has monster arms crushing him, and ribs digging at his lungs, and the memory of a beach at the forefront of his mind. There is a monster ahead of him, *inside* him; Max and the girl are behind him. The monster lunges for him – for his chest – with the intent to kill, and then, suddenly, it crashes toward the ground. The forward momentum of the arm continues, even as the others drag him down, and it hits him in the sternum, knocks the wind out of him (knocks the consciousness out of him, really), and it *hurts* – the broken ribs, the punctured lungs, the punch to the chest, the *guilt*... But it doesn't hurt more than anything he's used to living with under his father's thumb.

It hurts, but Billy has learned to expect that of the things that go bump in the night; monsters don't just hide under the bed, after all (they hide in people, too. There has been a monster called hatred, or love, he's not sure which, anymore, hiding in *him* for ages, far longer than the one he acquired when his car spun out and he was dragged, kicking and screaming, into the unknown). It hurts, and his vision goes spotty around the edges. He collapses to the ground, and the sound of his name – torn around the edges, cracked in the center,

stained with tears – is swallowed with him by the darkness.

2. Chapter 2

He's out of the hospital a week later, and he can feel panic crawling up his throat and threatening to choke him.

The doctors have told him that he's lucky, that he's defied all expectations, that his recovery is a miracle, that God must have great plans for him because he survived a partially crushed chest as well as the Starcourt Mall explosion.

Billy's pretty sure that the only plans God has for him involve punishment. He woke up every now and then in the hospital, and Max was almost always there. He saw Susan there a few times, too, and now that he's got a clear head, it makes him worry.

The only people who've ever come to see him when he was in the hospital were the ones who loved him. His father has never shown his face when Billy was in a hospital bed. That position was always his mother's, or any of the women from his father's string of girlfriends. Max and Susan have never visited him before, and Billy always consoled him with the knowledge that that meant they weren't leaving anytime soon.

He kicks at a crack in the sidewalk and wishes he had his Camaro; his ribs and lungs are still healing, even if the doctors have claimed that they're good enough for him to go home, and Billy's breathing is short and harsh and painful; the air burns at his lungs even though it's hot and dry. He almost wishes it was winter, because winter in Hawkins is cold, and he remembers how the freezing air had crept down his throat to numb him inside and out. At least with cold air the physical pain would be numbed.

Billy frowns, thinking about Max and Susan again. In the four years he's known them, they've never visited him; he always assumed that they were following his dad's lead, and he'd always known that as long as they didn't come, they'd stay.

But they came this time, and he wonders if that means that they love him, now. He wonders if that means they're going to leave him.

He thinks it probably does; Max and Susan lasted longer than anyone other than Billy's mother, and while neither of them have experienced the full force of his dad's rage, Billy knows it's only a matter of time. Neil's fists are always pounding after love, and now that Max and Susan have opened themselves up to the latter, Billy knows that the former will follow. That's the way it's always been in his father's household, and that's the way it'll always be.

He gets to a crosswalk and tosses a quick glance to both sides. No one's coming, so he steps into the road, intent on getting back to Old Cherry Lane before Max and Susan decide that they love him, before his father decides that now's the time to dust off the old wife-beaters, before someone else leaves him because they know, like his mother knew, like Lucy and Martha and Alice and Elizabeth knew, that love is not worth the pain.

Tires screech, and Billy flinches, looking wildly around himself. The street is empty, save for a maroon BMW that Billy knows belongs to Steve Harrington.

"Hargrove?" Harrington's voice calls, and Billy faces him with hunched shoulders and aching ribs and burning lungs. Suddenly, he feels very out of breath, and he tries to ignore the knowledge that the pain isn't just a reminder of his time under the General's control, that the thing choking him isn't just fear of his family's love. Steve t-boned him, he reminds himself. Taking it a step further, Steve is the reason he's walking home from the hospital.

"Harrington," Billy returns, pasting a sneer across his face. There's a girl in the passenger seat of Steve's car, and she has dirty blonde hair, and blue eyes, and freckles. She's pretty, Billy thinks, if you're into that sort of thing.

"You wanna ride, man?" Steve asks, tilting his head. The girl shoots him a surprised glance before offering Billy something resembling a smile.

Billy swallows. "Uh. Sure," he says eloquently. He opens the back driver's side door and slides in.

"Buckle," Steve commands, and doesn't start driving again until Billy

does. “To Old Cherry?” he asks. “Or somewhere else? Max didn’t say that you were coming home today, but I suppose she’s got other things on her mind at the moment.”

Billy’s heart leaps into his throat. No doubt *other things* are Max and Susan packing the car so that they can leave Hawkins in the rear-view mirror. “Yeah,” he rasps, slumping in the back seat. He’s too late. Max and Susan are leaving because Billy screwed up and did something to make them love him. “Old Cherry. Thanks, Harrington.”

He can see Steve’s frown in the mirror. “Did she not tell you what’s happening? I thought you’d be more excited, man.”

“Me and Max don’t really talk. She was at the hospital, but she didn’t say much.” For good reason, Billy thinks. If he was leaving, he wouldn’t tell the people he was leaving behind either. He’d wait for them to figure it out on their own. “I can guess what’s going on, though,” he adds.

Steve glances over his shoulder, his eyes scrutinizing. “Yeah? I really thought you’d be happier, man. Max’s told us that your old man’s a real hard-ass and that she’s glad he’s finally fucked off somewhere.”

“*What?*” Billy chokes. “Neil’s leaving?”

“He’s already gone, dude,” the girl says, rolling her eyes. “Max and your step-mom are just clearing his crap out.”

“Why’d he leave? Where’d he go?”

“I guess he tried to hit Max ‘cause she *disrespected* him by telling him that she’d be at the festival for the fourth of July and then never showed up. Susan saw, I guess, and kicked him out. Max said that Susan told your dad that she might not be able to do anything about how he treats *you*, but that he damn well wouldn’t lay a hand on her daughter,” Steve says calmly. “I think she’s filing for a divorce, but he fucked off on the fifth and no one’s seen him since. If they can’t find him before the trial or whatever, I guess Susan might be granted the divorce in *absentia* or something.”

So Max and Susan aren’t leaving. It’s his dad, who’s never loved him,

who's leaving. Billy wonders if he'll be expected to leave, too, and thinks that it's a good thing that he's freshly eighteen. He'll be able to use the money he managed to save up from his lifeguarding job to get an apartment; he'll get a job to keep paying it, and he'll figure out what to do about his senior year of high school when he gets there.

"You think she'll let me stay at the house for a few days? Just until I can find something to rent and get a job?" He can't bring himself to meet Steve's eyes.

Steve frowns. "Why d'you need to find a place to rent?"

Billy stares at him. He knows that Steve sucked at school – Tommy and Carol had never said it in so many words, but the other girls and all the guys on the basketball team liked to laugh about it over lunch – but surely he isn't so oblivious that he doesn't realize why Billy wouldn't be wanted at Old Cherry anymore. "Max and Susan aren't gonna want me there," he murmurs.

Steve rolls his eyes. "And why not?"

"I'm not even Susan's real kid," Billy sighs. "And I'm eighteen, now. She's not obligated to take care of me anymore."

"Billy... Max says Susan *cried* when she heard you were in the hospital. I'm pretty sure that she thinks of you as her kid. I'm pretty sure she *wants* you to stay at Old Cherry."

That's... not possible. Billy was deliberately difficult. When he wasn't so tired of acting like an asshole that he just couldn't, anymore, he did everything in his power to ensure that neither Susan nor Max would like him, because... ever since his mother left, he's wanted someone to take her place. He's always wanted a sibling, and Max and Susan had come along and given him that, and he'd wanted to *keep* them, and he'd known...

The only way they'd stay was if they hated him. That was the one thing he'd been absolutely certain of, because his father had hated him, and he'd always stayed.

But Neil is gone, now, and Max and Susan are still here, and Billy

doesn't know what to do.

"Okay," he finally says. He thinks about how he has emulated his father for years, about how he has hurt people with his words and with his fists, about how he has engendered hate in the hearts of those he loved so that they would stay. He thinks about how *tired* it all made him. He wonders what it would be like to give in, to be soft, to stop fighting.

He's tired of trying to be something he's not, and he's tired of being hated.

He used to think he understood the world: love lies and leaves, and hatred remains. But now Neil is gone, and Billy doesn't understand anything anymore. He doesn't *know* anything anymore, except that he's tired of pretending.

"Okay," he repeats, giving in. He allows himself to hope that Susan and Max are the exception to the rule he has spent his entire life learning.

Steve drops him off at the end of the driveway, and Billy clammers out of the car. The girl – Robin – waves at Billy as she and Steve pull away, and Billy stares at the house on Old Cherry Lane.

Max and Susan are inside. His... sister and stepmother are inside, waiting for him, loving him, *wanting* him, and so he steps inside.

Max is in the kitchen with Susan; they're making sandwiches, and they don't see him at first.

"I –" his voice cracks, and he tries again, unable to look at them. "I'm sorry for acting like my dad."

"Billy?" Susan says tentatively, and he looks up. She is smiling, and the sadness in it makes his eyes burn. "I forgive you. And I'm sorry that I never stepped in when Neil was hurting you."

He nods, biting his lip so that the tears won't escape. Max approaches him, and she wraps her arms around him carefully. "I forgive you, too," she whispers into his chest. "I'm glad you're alive," she adds.

“I’ve already lost one big brother. I don’t need to lose another one.”

Billy’s tears spill out over his cheeks. He doesn’t know much about Wesley Mayfield, but he does know that, once upon a time, Max had an older brother. And once upon a time, he died, and Max got stuck with Billy instead. “I’m sorry,” he repeats, over and over, apologizing for everything until he’s no longer sure what, exactly, he’s apologizing for.

3. Chapter 3

The only reason Billy knows that there's anything going on with what Max has dubbed "the Upside Down" is because, five days after coming home from the hospital, he coughs up black slime that, upon coming in contact with the oppressively hot Indiana summer, squeals and squirms and congeals in a manner reminiscent of the way the people he had lured into the General's grasp had after they'd melted into fleshy blobs.

So he coughs up the slime, or the Upside Down juice, or whatever the hell it is, and then he throws up at the sight of it and the memories it drags to the surface; when he goes to Max's room, tasting panic rising unwelcome like bile in his throat, she's gone, and her window is wide open.

The only bright side to this, he thinks, is that Neil is long gone, so even if Susan is furious at him for not paying enough attention to Max's whereabouts, she won't hit him. She might berate him, or kick him out, but she won't hit him because (and he knows this first-hand) it is harder to hit someone than it is to watch them get hit, and she couldn't even do that the one time she saw it happen.

He thinks that maybe his father had thought she was weak for that, but Billy cannot help but think that, in her own way, Susan is strong. She may not have loved Billy when she saw his father throwing him up against walls and introducing his hands to Billy's face and growling slurs at him, but she loved and loves Max enough to make sure that she won't get hurt.

Billy thinks that sometimes running away is the action that requires the most strength; he knows better than most, because his mother did it, and so did all the women after her. They ran away and saved themselves, and it was Billy who was too weak to do anything but stay and take it. Susan, like the others, has removed herself from the situation, but she didn't *run*. She forced Neil out, and she took her daughter with her; that's something that none of the others have done. They had the strength to take themselves, but not to take someone else.

Susan, Billy decides, is the strongest of them all. Max is lucky to have her as a mother.

Max is still missing, though, and Billy doesn't have a car or a clue how to find her. He'd kinda thought that, now that they were on better terms (and they've been on vaguely better terms since early November, because Billy may have wanted Max and Susan to hate him so that they'd stay, but even *he* couldn't tolerate just how far he'd gone; Max didn't need to be *afraid* of him to hate him, and so he'd apologized and done his best to stay out of her way), she wouldn't run off without telling him. But she's always done that, and Billy's not sure why he expected anything to change.

He may be clued in on the Upside Down stuff now, but he's still Max's asshole stepbrother whose redemption arc everyone has missed because he's had it while he left them alone, while he was possessed by the General, while he was unconscious and waking up and in the hospital and coming home to his father's departure. He's better now, he thinks, and he's been a work in progress for months, but the thing about making everyone hate him?

No one's around to see him changing in the shadows. He's a dick who gets better off screen, who goes from having a stepsister who hates him to a sister who loves him in the hours and days and months that nobody sees.

Billy thinks that it sucks a little – no, a lot – that he was so invested in this idea that he could only keep people around if they hated him; it only took three people to show him how wrong he was. It took Max and Susan – the mother and sister he thought hated him, who he now *knows* love him, staying; and it took Neil – the man he *knew* hated him, who was always there, who stayed through everything, looking over his shoulder, aggressively disapproving, heavy-handed and heavy-hearted, leaving.

And now Billy is left with the regret that comes with misunderstanding the world entirely, with the realization that he is alone because he has *always* lived in a different world than the people around him, with the knowledge that he is the only one who is aware that he's been changing since the night he wore a blood red shirt to a fistfight and tried to carve the fear of the world into a kid's

bones...

Yeah, Billy's got a lotta regrets; he's got a head full of what-ifs and would've-should've-could've-beens, and he's only got himself to blame.

He wonders how many open doors he's slammed shut, wonders how many windows he's left open for escape, wonders if the hate he's spat in people's faces has done irreparable damage.

He wonders if the reason Max is missing has anything to do with the slime he coughed up and the Gate that he knows was open.

He moves towards the front door, intent on finding Max before she manages to get herself in too much trouble, when the world flickers around him, sliding from Hawkins' heat and blinding, mirage-inducing sun to a monotone world with a vine infestation that makes him feel sick.

The last time he saw this place, he had a body double standing in front of him. The last time he saw this place, he came back possessed, with the desire to hurt people and make the entire world rot engraved deeper than his bones.

This, he knows now, is the Upside Down, and the sight of it makes him scream, unthinking, for Max before the world shifts again.

He collapses to the floor, shivering, and for the first time since waking up, he wishes that he hadn't survived that night at Starcourt.

The bank keeps Susan late, so she isn't at dinner that night; when Max tells him where she was and what she was doing, there's no need for sneaking into bedrooms to exchange whispered words. They are able, for once, to have a conversation in their own home without fearing the repercussions. It's another thing to add to Billy's list of why it's good that his dad is gone. No more hate, no more beatings, no more fear, the ability to hold private conversations. He's sure that, in the coming days, the list will be so long that he'll forget what's on it.

It's a good thing that Neil's gone, but... Billy kinda misses his dad. He wonders what it says about him that the person he fears the most is someone he loves.

"Hopper's back," Max says through a mouthful of macaroni.

Billy frowns at her. "Swallow before speaking, Maxine. I didn't realize he was gone."

"There was a secret Russian base underneath Starcourt. That's where the Gate was. Hopper and Ms Byers closed it and Hop got stuck in the Upside Down. 'S where he's been the past twelve days. We've known he was down there since day... two, I think? He was calling Steve from down there, and then El got in contact with him, too. We had to open the Gate again, but he's out, and El was able to close it again."

Billy swallows. "I knew the Gate was open."

"You did? How?"

He shrugs. "I dunno. I coughed up some Upside Down slime, and then I just knew, and then it was like I was in the Upside Down for a second. 'S why I was in bed when you got home. Felt like shit afterwards."

She pales. "You were *in* the Upside Down? And there was slime?"

"That's what I just said."

Max shoves the last bite of her food in her mouth and heads over to the phone.

"What're you doing?"

"Letting the others know. It was happening with Will at the beginning of last year, around the time you and I first got here. It turned out he was possessed by the Mind Flayer, so we had to get it outta him and close the Gate."

"You think I might still be possessed?" Billy asks, suddenly feeling like he doesn't quite belong in his own skin.

Max regards him with a serious expression. “No. The Gate’s closed. I think it was probably just a side effect of the Gate being opened again, but the others will want to know anyway.”

He’s not sure that he believes her, but Billy stays seated at the kitchen table and picks sullenly at his food while Max makes her phone calls. He hopes that the General – the Mind Flayer, whatever – is gone for good, and he has no illusions that he’s the only one.

He expects that they’ll be going to the Byerses’ or Steve’s or even Chief Hopper’s, but instead the Hargrove-Mayfield household seems to stretch in an effort to fit two adults who aren’t Susan or Neil, Jonathan Byers, Nancy Wheeler, Steve, Robin, four of Max’s friends from school, some random dude with a very shiny head and a beard, and the girl who’d saved him from the General back in Starcourt.

She looks at him with huge eyes, sticks her hand out awkwardly, and reintroduces herself stiltedly: “I am Jane. It is good to see you are looking more like yourself.”

Billy takes Jane’s hand and shakes it carefully. She’s tiny, and she looks fragile, but her hand is firm in his, and her expression is determined. “Thank you?” He’s not entirely sure what she means by that, but it sounds like a good thing, at least. “I’m sorry,” he adds, gesturing first at her neck and then at all of her; he’s not really used to apologizing, and the way Hopper is hovering over Jane like a concerned parent tells him that saying something like: *Sorry for dangling you in the air by your neck and trying to sacrifice you to the General* would be a very bad idea.

“I’m sorry about... everything,” he tells everyone else. He’s apologized to Steve and Lucas for what happened in November, and to Ms Byers for breaking her stuff, and to everyone else for being a dick, but he feels like everything with the General needs apologies as well, and he’s not quite sure how to give them, or who to give them to. It’s a lot. He’s done a lot of awful things to probably everyone in this entire town, but the truly terrible stuff seems to have been dumped on the strange group of people sitting in his living room.

It’s Will – with his bowl cut, tired eyes, pale skin, and bones that

seem even thinner than Jane's – that steps forward. His voice is soft when he tells Billy: "If you're apologizing for what you did under the General's control, don't. I know it feels like it's your fault now, but it isn't, and there was nothing you could've done." He looks around at everyone standing around them. "I would know. And if you ever want to talk about anything, I'm willing to listen. It helps. A lot."

Billy nods sharply, unable to speak around the tightness of his throat. Everyone else has already shrugged off his apology, or is offering him a smile, and he's not sure what to do with this easy forgiveness. He's used to no forgiveness and years-old grudges, to a mocking nod followed up with a fist or a foot. He's used to conditions, and they're giving him *none*.

"Sorry," Max says, her eyebrows drawn together in a way that emphasizes the way her mouth is turned down, "but who's the General?"

Will smiles sheepishly at her. "The Mind Flayer is the General. At least, that's the best description. They'd already chosen a name when I was possessed, and I kinda liked the ones my friends chose better than the one I knew, you know?"

Billy snorts. "You guys call the General the Mind Flayer? That's certainly an apt description."

"Yup," Dustin says, popping the *p* obnoxiously. Billy valiantly hides his irritation.

"Anyway," Hopper interjects, leaning forward. "We didn't come here for apologies or discussions about the General and the President or their alternative names. We came here to reassure you that the Gate is closed. Not only would El know if it weren't – and we all saw her close it – but so would Will and I. And I think that you would know, too. It's over, finally. We're all alive, and the Upside Down is closed."

Billy isn't the only one who breathes a sigh of relief that day and every day after.

The Upside Down is closed, and they're all alive.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you guys enjoyed this! I wish I was able to get more out of this, but I've been losing inspiration/the desire to write fanfic recently, and I'm just trying to finish up the stuff I've started.

I'll start posting what I've got of the Steve-centric AU prequel soon.

Thanks for reading!